



WHAT MAKES A SUCCESSFUL, INNOVATIVE TEAM?

PROFESSOR CYRIL BOUQUET ON INNOVATIVE TEAMS ON THE OCCASION
OF IMD MBA INNOVATION WEEK

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What makes a successful, innovative team? This is a fundamental question innovation specialists have investigated over the years. My experience at IMD suggests that great moments of creativity often arise when teams manage to reconcile aspects of team effectiveness that often tend to conflict with each other.

Trade-off #1: Diversity of perspectives and willingness to work with each other. Organizations often stress the importance of bringing a complementary mix of skills and perspectives into the work of a team. Indeed, [a variety of studies](#) has shown that diverse teams are able to define problems in smarter ways, and to generate a wider range of original and useful solutions than more-homogeneous teams. But, diversity benefits can't arise unless you have a motivated group of people who share a common purpose and are willing to work with each other. All too often I have seen organizations design teams in a top-down manner, with a type of "diversity algorithm" in mind, and this simply does not work. Innovation is hard work. Disagreement and conflicts will arise. The chemistry that exists among people is as important as the mix of skills they bring to the collective task.

Trade-off #2: Empathy and objectivity. Innovation requires a capacity to see how something that exists could be better. For this, one needs to connect to the world, and step into other people's shoes, to understand their lives, and identify problems that may exist from their perspectives. Through empathy, one can understand what people "Do", "Think", and "Feel", and, in turn, open themselves up to new creative possibilities that lead them to innovate. But, innovation also requires objectivity, not just empathy. Connecting with the people you're designing for doesn't mean you should lose sight of objective facts and data. We must connect and relate to people yes, but as we do so, we also keep an open mind, and question assumptions that might blur our thinking in the process. It is by combining empathy and objectivity that we can hope to see the world as it is –not as we think it is.

Trade-off #3: Psychological safety and healthy frictions. Google led a two-year research project with 280 teams. They found only one distinction between innovative and non-innovative teams—psychological safety. Teams have psychological safety when their members feel they have the permission to openly share ideas and try new things without fear of negative consequences. This is absolutely true provided the attempt to create such safety does lead a team to engage in overly consensual discussions where every idea that emerges is a good one. Truly innovative teams are a bit ruthless with each other. They speak their mind and challenge ideas until they can make them work. As my dear colleague Bill Fischer often reminds us "Be impolite. Polite teams have polite results." The-best-senior-teams-thrive-on-disagreement. So yes, we must create safety within the team, provided it does not result in the instauration of a "happy climate" where people care and "support" each other but fail to "challenge" the group in the process. Healthy frictions are necessary for innovative work to blossom.

Embracing these trade-offs is not always easy. You may be tempted to believe your team is doing well because it is structured in a way that promotes diversity, empathy and a climate of psychological safety. But what about the other aspects of your team's functioning? Do you feel your team unites people who have a strong willingness to work with each other? How well are you using evidence to define problems and search for solutions? Are you caring and yet also sufficiently impolite in the way you all relate to each other?

The makeup of a successful innovative team is not an exact science. It requires a subtle mix of ingredients that is not easy to create in practice. Reconciling the three trade-offs presented here offers a few perspectives to consider at the start of your next innovation journey.

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Read more about [Innovation Week](#) led by Cyril for IMD's MBA program.